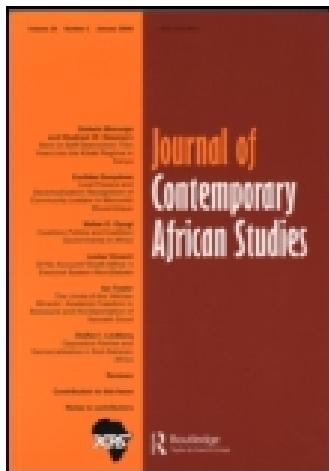


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Civil society and state-centred struggles

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This article is about civil society and state-centred struggles in contemporary Zimbabwe. I first identify and outline three current understandings of civil society. Two understandings (one Liberal, one Radical) are state-centric and exist firmly within the logic of state discourses and state politics. A third understanding, also Radical, is society-centric and speaks about politics existing at a distance from the state and possibly beyond the boundaries of civil society. This civil society-state discussion frames the second section of the article, which looks specifically at Zimbabwe. It details civil society as contested terrain (from the late 1990s onwards) within the context of a scholarly debate about agrarian transformation and political change. This debate, which reproduces (in theoretical garb) the key political society (or party) fault-lines within Zimbabwean society, has taken place primarily within the restricted confines of state-centred discourses.

Keywords: civil society; liberal and radical versions

Introduction

This article is about civil society and state-centred struggles in contemporary Zimbabwe. Globally, the notion of civil society is a highly contested one and it has been cleansed of some of its more radical discursive history. At times it has been, quite problematically, reduced to the 'NGO sector'. The term 'progress', which was the main theme for the conference out of which this article arose, has a Euro-centric ring to it. Nevertheless, if understood dialectically, it has a certain universality that speaks to present-day Zimbabwean contestations.

The article is divided into two main sections. First of all, I identify and outline three current understandings of civil society and by necessity raise the vexed question of the state. Two understandings (one Liberal, one Radical) are state-centric and exist firmly within the logic of state discourses and state politics. A third understanding, also Radical, is society-centric and speaks about politics existing at a distance from the state and possibly beyond the boundaries of civil society. All three understandings normally describe civil society in terms of its institutional make-up (and concomitant political content) and not as a social space marked by civil liberties and voluntary-contractual relations.

This civil society-state discussion frames the second section of the article, which looks specifically at Zimbabwe. It details civil society as contested terrain (from the late 1990s onwards) within the context of a scholarly debate about agrarian transformation and political change. This debate, which reproduces (in theoretical garb) the key political society (or party) fault-lines within Zimbabwean society, has

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taken place primarily within the restricted confines of state-centred discourses. As a result, intellectual work on Zimbabwe is in large part disengaged from Radical society-centred conceptions of civil society which may offer a sounder basis for authentic social progress.

I conclude the article by tentatively questioning the applicability of the notion of civil society—understood as a particular kind of social space and not in terms of its institutional makeup—to a capitalist society in which the hallmarks of liberal state democracy are severely compromised (such as Zimbabwe).

Civil society

This section considers three prevailing conceptions of civil society and civil society-state linkages: a Liberal conception, and state-centric and society-centric Radical conceptions.

The liberal version of civil society

The dominant understanding of civil society in Africa is a Liberal one. ‘Civil society’, in current Liberal thought, forms part of a conceptual couplet: both a civil society-state couplet and a civil society-communitarian couplet. These couplets assert that civil society (seen as a progressive social force) struggles against the modern state (with its democratic deficits and often authoritarian rule in the case of Africa) and against pre-modern communitarian sociality (often lodged in rural areas where civil society is said to be incipient and undeveloped). State and communitarian relations both entail totalising compulsions contrary to the voluntary and contractual civility of ‘civil society’.

The first couplet depicts civil society as a universalising logic that opposes the particularistic interests of the state, and it becomes the driving force behind processes of democratic modernity. Civil society is defined in relation to the nation-state and, generally, this relationship is portrayed as antagonistic throughout Africa, with civil society as progressive and the state as regressive. A universalising civil society wages war against a particularistic and centralising state and is supposed to recover for society a range of powers and activities that states have usurped in previous decades. This argument makes problematic the Hegelian notion that the state and not civil society represents the general interest (although it is an argument made with specific reference to un-democratic states), as well as the Marxist claim (such as articulated by Antonio Gramsci) that civil society is a regressive site marked by domination and conflict (Baker 2002).

In terms of the second couplet, the concept of civil society is compared, in typical modernisation language, to communitarian forms of social organisation that continue to structure (in particular) agrarian social realities. In a real sense, this is consistent with Mamdani’s (1996) well-known distinction between citizens (within civil society) and subjects (of traditional rule). Communitarian relations (for example, chiefdoms and customary tenure) are said to be regressive particulars that result in democratic and development deficiencies. From the Liberal perspective, these relations undermine the unequivocally progressive and universalising content of civil society and its modernist endeavours vis-à-vis the (un-democratic) nation-state.

Despite the recent flourishing of actual civil society in Africa under anti-statist neo-liberal conditions, the Liberal interpretation of the concept is statist or at least state-centric. In the end, the Liberal position entails an instrumentalist view of civil society (understood organisationally) as a formidable weapon for democratising the nation-state. At one level, then, civil society is defined in opposition to (or against) the (un-democratic) state. On another level, though, the *modus operandi* of civil society is contained with the rationalities of liberal democratic state politics. Any antagonism between state and civil society occurs within a broad state-civil society consensual framework (based on the rule of law) through which the liberal state delimits and structures what is acceptable (i.e. civil society) politics. Ultimately, civil society is supportive specifically of the liberal democratic state form, leading to state-civil society collaborative and partnership arrangements that facilitate overall social domination. Politics beyond this consensual domain are viewed by both state and civil society as outside the realm of authentic politics and hence as illegitimate politics if not outright criminal. For this reason, the Liberal notion of civil society is highly exclusionary, as Fernandes (2010) strikingly highlights in the case of contemporary Venezuela.

Conceptually, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)—as professionalised entities—fall within liberal civil society as the critical institutional force. Hence, NGOs are often portrayed as constituting civil society or at least are viewed as the most ‘civil’ arm of civil society. Development NGOs, it is argued, play a particularly important role vis-à-vis building rural civil sociality. At the same time, NGOs in Africa (both foreign and indigenous) are regularly appraised critically as mere instruments of global donors that seek to challenge states deemed undemocratic. As part of a global ‘conscious conspiracy’ (Manji and O’Coill 2002, 579), NGOs are said to have a ‘hidden agenda’ (Monga 1996, 156). As Crewe and Harrison (1998, 89) note: ‘Donors [and their NGO ‘creations’] are sometimes portrayed as strategically wielding the control they have over recipients for their own ends in a coordinated way to uphold the present capitalist system’. In this way, NGOs fit neatly into the liberal civil society mould in trying to bring about democratic transition and consolidation. At the same time, there is some global evidence which suggests that at times specific NGOs move outside the liberal state consensus (Borras Jr. 2008).

Radical civil society (state-centric and society-centric)

Unlike the NGO-ish Liberal view of civil society, the two Radical notions depict progressive civil society (understood in terms of its institutional make-up) as social movement-based. The state-centric position (which, traditionally, is associated with a large body of classical-mainstream Marxist and Nationalist thinking) speaks about political strategies directed at the state and proclaims the possibility of transformation in, through and by means of the state. Society-centred radical change is more in line with Anarchist and Radical Libertarian thought that speaks not of acquiring or capturing state power (either through evolutionary or revolutionary means) but of developing counter-power (or, perhaps more apt, anti-power) inside the bowels of civil society without and despite the state.

The society-centric perspective argues that social (including class) domination is embodied within the very form of the state; in other words, domination within capitalism is tied up inextricably with (and within) the very fabric and texture of the

modern state. State-centred theorists, such as Wainwright (2005, 52), while not denying that state institutions controlled by even Left (or Centre-Left) political parties regularly—as a pronounced trajectory—‘lord it over the people’, nevertheless claim that ‘the pull of the state away from the people is not inscribed in the state’s character [in a law-like fashion] but is historically produced and subject to historical transformations’. This implies that transformation in and through the state cannot be ruled out *a priori* and is contingent on the balance of social forces.

For society-centric theorists, authentic politics is ‘autonomous’ politics unbound from the logic and rationalities of the state (that is, politics not on the state’s terrain or terms), whether this logic derives from the liberal state/civil society consensus or from—supposedly—radical state-driven projects of transformation (as per the Radical state-centric notion). Liberal democratic and radicalised (i.e. ‘Left-leaning’ but regularly authoritarian) states, in their own ways, constantly seek to transform non-state spaces into state spaces—understood not institutionally but subjectively as social fields defined, categorised, made legible to and controlled by the state. This takes on different and shifting forms: consensually (through the NGO form), via compulsive local patronage politics but also coercively. Radical society-centred politics often goes against the grain of state and NGO rationalities; hence autonomous sites of struggle prove difficult to nurture and sustain. Chatterjee (2002, 70) notes though in relation to India that the ‘squalor, ugliness and violence of popular life’ (and popular struggles) cannot be imprisoned ‘within the sanitised fortress of civil society’. In this sense, an un-civil space outside civil society may form the basis of genuine social progress (Neocosmos 2011).

This discussion of Liberal and Radical versions of civil society frames the following critical overview of civil society in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe

Initially, in the early years of Zimbabwean independence, the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) party inhibited the growth of autonomous trade unions and social movements, and effectively took them under its organisational wing. Independent trade unions and urban civic groups emerged in the 1990s, but they were increasingly met with a degree of repression by the party through the organs of the state (Nhema 2002). The exact relationship between ZANU-PF and the land movement (starting in the year 2000) remains controversial. Critics of fast track (Hammar, Raftopoulos, and Jensen 2003) claim that the land movement was simply an electoral ploy of ZANU-PF and that it was initiated and stage-managed by the ruling party. Others (Moyo and Yeros 2005) argue that the land movement cannot be reduced neatly to the party and that the movement had (at least originally) a degree of autonomy from the party-state. In this section I examine the main debate that has been present in some form within Zimbabwean studies over the past decade, and I discuss its relevance to critical questions about Zimbabwean civil society.

A good entry point into the debate is certain claims made by Moyo and Yeros (2005). They refer to the land occupations underpinning fast track land reform as ‘the most important [recent] challenge to the neocolonial state in Africa’ (Moyo and Yeros 2005, 165), with fast track having a ‘fundamentally progressive nature’ (Moyo and Yeros 2005, 188). The Zimbabwean state, in large part because of its anti-

imperialist stance and anti-colonial restructuring, is labelled as a ‘radicalised state’ (Moyo and Yeros 2007). Other scholars, such as Raftopoulos and Phimister (2004) and Marongwe (2008) make substantially different arguments in highlighting the regressive nature of political changes in Zimbabwe over the past decade.

Critics of Moyo and Yeros claim that the latter’s statements about fast track entail almost perverse value judgements made by ‘patriotic agrarianists’ (Moore 2004, 409) or ‘left-nationalists’ (Bond and Manyanya 2003, 78) who fail to conceptualise analytically or even highlight empirically the repressive character of state nationalism in contemporary Zimbabwe, designated as an ‘exclusionary’ nationalism (Hammar, Raftopoulos, and Jensen 2003), an ‘exhausted’ nationalism (Bond and Manyanya 2003) or an ‘authoritarian populist anti-imperialism’ (Moore 2003, 8). Raftopoulos and Phimister (2004) argue that this authoritarianism involves an ‘internal reconfiguration of Zimbabwean state politics’ (Raftopoulos and Phimister 2004, 377) and amounts to ‘domestic tyranny’ (Raftopoulos and Phimister 2004, 356), and they speak about a ‘number of African intellectuals on the Left’ (including Moyo and Yeros, but also Ibbo Mandaza) who ‘leapt to the defence of ZANU PF’ (Raftopoulos and Phimister 2004, 376) and its re-distributive economic policies.

For their part, Moyo and Yeros claim that their critics (who they call neo-liberal apologists for imperialism or ‘civic/post-nationalists’) demote the significance of national self-determination and the agrarian question in Zimbabwe as expressed in the land movement by focusing on the movement’s excessive violence and eventual co-option by the ruling party and state. They therefore argue that it is essential to conceptualise the land occupations in the context of a re-radicalised (and revitalised) state nationalism and the ongoing movement of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) under post-colonial conditions.

The debate involves fundamentally different conceptions of the Zimbabwean crisis. On the one hand, there is a radical nationalist discourse that speaks of a land crisis and that stresses national sovereignty and re-distributive policies. In terms of this discourse, Raftopoulos (2006) says that land ‘became the sole central signifier of national redress, constructed through a series of discursive exclusions’ (Raftopoulos 2006, 212). This process of exclusion entails sidelining and undercutting sub-national counter-narratives found in what the state would label as the more ‘marginal’ spaces of Zimbabwean society, including rural Matabeleland and the urban trade union movement (Alexander, McGregor, and Ranger 2000, Raftopoulos 2001). On the other hand, there is a liberal democratic discourse that refers to a governance crisis and that emphasises human rights and political democratisation (Hammar, Raftopoulos, and Jensen 2003, Sachikonye 2002), and that involves a ‘managerial, modernising nationalism’ (Rutherford 2002, 1).

The first discourse focuses on the external (imperialist) determinants of the crisis and the latter on its internal (nation-state) determinants (Freeman 2005). However, both discourses seem to have roots in the notion of the NDR, with the former prioritising the ‘national’ (in struggling against imperialism) and the latter the ‘democratic’ (in struggling against an authoritarian state) (Moore 2004). For example, Mandaza (with links to the ruling party), says that during the late 1990s post-nationalist forces in alliance with foreign elements were engaged in a subterranean ‘social crisis strategy’ that sought to make Zimbabwe ungovernable, and that the (supposedly radical) intellectual representatives of these forces sought to

prioritise issues of governance and democracy ‘at the expense of addressing the National Question’ (The ‘Scrutator’ in *The Zimbabwe Mirror*, 28 April to 4 May 2000). Thus, the civic nationalism propagated by these theorists (such as Raftopoulos) is portrayed as ‘progressive’ urban civil groups warring against the state, and this entails seeking to undermine economic (re-distributive) nationalism rightly articulated (according to Mandaza) by a beleaguered nation-state under the onslaught of imperialism in the capitalist periphery.

This literature has been marked sometimes by crude objectifications and dualisms (not unlike the rhetoric of the political parties—ZANU-PF and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, MDC). For instance, war veterans that led and drove the land occupations of White commercial farms are seen as the storm-troopers of an authoritarian government and political elite with intentions of economic accumulation. The land movement, as an internally differentiated social movement with a fluidity and vibrancy of its own, is reduced to the machinations of a corrupt political party. On the other side of the political spectrum, the argument goes that urban civics are anti-land reform and are mere local instruments of global capital and donors pursuing crafty imperialist agendas. Urban civics, involving diverse and complex organisational forms responsive to a range of global and local pressures, are treated homogeneously as ‘black boxes’ devoid of agency, simply existing to respond to the tunes of the pied piper.

The debate in many ways captures the main political schisms and discourses that exist in Zimbabwean society, therefore articulating party-political conflicts in theoretical clothing. The conflict is state-centric (changing the state or defending the state) and, ultimately, the debate reproduces state rationalities and subjectivities. In this regard, the Liberal notion of civil society (laid out by the ‘civic nationalists’) clearly dominates in relation to academic commentary on Zimbabwe, and it is exemplified in the many writings of Kagoro (2003, 2005) as chairperson of the Crisis in Zimbabwe Coalition (CZC). The Liberal notion involves highlighting the institutional make-up or ‘organisations of civil society’ (Laakso 1996, 218) (in the form of urban civics or NGOs) and its progressive character (Magure 2009). Civil society as a bounded socio-political space constituted in and through civil liberties is rarely discussed. Intriguingly, the ‘radical nationalists’ do not dispute this institutional delimitation of civil society but rather challenge civil society’s supposed progressive status.¹ Likewise, the state-aligned dominant faction of the war veteran movement would find it extremely repugnant to be labelled as part of ‘civil society’ (McCandless 2011).

The ‘civic nationalists’ speak about the progressive nature of civil society and the regressive nature of the Zimbabwean state. The range of intellectuals aligned to this position includes both Liberals and Leftists, as witnessed by the list of intellectuals that voiced their concerns about an article written by Mamdani (2008) in the *London Review of Books* which purportedly supported ZANU-PF. This aligning of Liberals and Radicals in ‘proclaiming civil society as the most viable alternative to the failed state’ was noted nearly two decades ago by Jonathan Moyo (1993, 4), now of ZANU-PF fame. In the face of an authoritarian Zimbabwean state, the contemporary civic nationalists regularly glorify and romanticise civil society in building democracy, reducing the latter to urban civic bodies (for example, the National Constitutional Assembly, NCA and the CZC) and middle-class NGOs. Development NGOs in Zimbabwe, notably international NGOs such as World Vision, are effectively locked

into the liberal civil society paradigm in seeking to modernise agriculture in customary areas (Helliker 2008). Likewise, many foreign-funded local NGOs (such as Kunzwana Women's Association) doing 'development' work amongst farm labourers on commercial farms (in a self-declared civilising mission) seek to build civil association on these farms; in doing so, they fail to recognise the existence of more indigenous forms of rural civility (Rutherford 2004). This all leads to a cleansed, exclusionary and hollowed out notion of civil society, and fails to recognise that antagonisms over the past decade have not occurred in a neat and tidy dichotomous civil society/state fashion. For instance, under pressure from 'occupiers' on commercial farm property, the Zimbabwean state abandoned its long-term alliance with White agricultural capital (arguably part of an economic-rooted civil society) and forged a fresh alliance with the 'occupiers' (arguably on the edge of a rule-of-law civil society).

The point is that this argument downplays tensions that occur within civil society and focuses on tensions between 'progressive' civil society and the 'regressive' state (or, more aptly, the argument at times displaces the former tensions onto the latter). The work by Ncube (2010), in highlighting the tensions within Zimbabwean civil society, is an excellent corrective in this regard; in particular, he speaks of a hegemonic civil society linked to ZANU-PF and a counter-hegemonic civil society aligned to MDC, and of the struggles between them. In the case of fast track, and the wider political struggles that emerged around it, considerable conflict took place within civil society—including between commercial landholders and farm workers and between urban-based NGOs (including the NCA) and the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association (ZNLWVA). But, as McCandless (2011) documents, such conflicts also occurred between (and within urban civics), notably between the NCA and CZC. In addition, as part of civil society, land-holding commercial farmers (admittedly known for their quasi-authoritarian agrarian rule) played a particularly regressive role in seeking to uphold racialised rural spaces in Zimbabwean society against a state that was undercutting 'domestic government' (to use Rutherford's 2001–Foucauldian notion).

This Liberal civil society argument also fails to do justice to the varied kinds and textures of sociability in rural fast track Zimbabwe. When civilities amongst rural petty commodity producers are acknowledged, it is normally in relation to their involvement in market-oriented forms of farmer production, distribution and consumption. The mobilisation and organisation that occurred during the land movement is regularly labelled as 'uncivil' because it undermined private property regimes and the prevailing market-based land transactions. Some ethnographic accounts of the mobilisation strategies and the forms of organisation that existed on the occupied farms even at the height of the land movement in the years 2000 and 2001 show that they often took on an easily recognisable civil form and content, as did the links between the farm structures on the one hand and the district and provincial war veteran associations on the other (Sadomba 2011). Research on older resettlement areas in Zimbabwe (from the 1980s) indicates that the redistribution of large-scale farms may in fact lead to the development of 'civil social activities' (Barr 2004), at least in comparison to the customary areas, as resettled farmers forge social relationships in the absence of traditional authorities. However, the seeming imposition of chieftainship systems in the newly resettled (fast track) farms may

counter the diverse forms of civil associations that have painstakingly emerged over the past ten years (Murisa 2011).

At the same time, civil groups are regularly and 'sadly undemocratic' (Makumbe 1998, 311). An ethnography of urban-based civic NGOs in Zimbabwe (notably human rights organisations) shows that their internal processes are often characterised by un-constitutional (and un-civil) procedures (Rich-Dorman 2001). More recently, the conflict within the NCA and the subsequent formation of the CZC led to serious self-reflection even within 'urban civil society'. For instance, Brilliant Mhlanga (2008) a human rights activist, wrote in 2008 that Zimbabwean 'civil society is showing double standards' and that it 'has internalised the image of the ruling party, its tactics and general guidelines, and is therefore fearful of freedom of any meaningful change' (see also Tendi 2008). Even those Zimbabwean academics who have long idealised urban civics as the site for transformation recently acknowledge the factionalised and troublesome nature of the civic movement (Saunders 2010).

Overall, the aim of Zimbabwean civil society is to democratise the state because, in the end, the state is the guarantor of democracy. The NCA and aligned urban groups have therefore sought to defend and advance political and civil liberties (i.e. to build civil society, as a rule-of-law social space) as well as to achieve power through the MDC in the contest for state hegemony. Civil society, as a set of organisations, is treated instrumentally and the state is perceived as the ultimate emancipator of society. The opposing side in the Zimbabwean debate, which I now discuss, loosely adopts the Radical state-centric argument and also posits the state as the critical site for social transformation.

Moyo and Yeros (2005, 2007), and Mandaza in a series of commentaries in *The Zimbabwe Mirror* from the year 2000 to 2002, overplay the prospects of genuine agrarian transformation by means of the Zimbabwean state. This is despite the fact that at times they, first of all, privilege autonomous rural action (the land occupations, which they label as 'uncivil' but not in any negative sense) in resolving lingering land questions; and, secondly, recognise that the state co-opted and subdued what was initially an autonomous movement. Their ultimate state fixation arises mainly because of a pre-conceived and fixed understanding of political change, most notably in terms of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR).

For instance, the land movement, starting in the year 2000, is said to represent a 'climax' of constant and consistent struggles over land by semi-proletarians (Moyo 2001, 314)—the ordained historical subjects of change—that seek to dramatically address both the agrarian and national questions and thereby the unfinished business of the NDR. In doing so, 'left-nationalists' bring to the fore the functionality of the state in legitimising and strengthening the land movement in the direction of the NDR.² State bureaucrats, aspiring black capitalists and ruling party leaders were able to develop hegemony over the movement, and they claimed ownership over the land revolution based on their liberation and indigenisation credentials. The worker-peasant basis of the agrarian reform process was soon in danger of a 'full reversal' (Moyo and Yeros 2005, 194) because of the comprador aspirations of the black bourgeoisie.

Moyo and Yeros go on to assert though that the process 'did not go far enough *within* the ruling party and the state to safeguard the peasant-worker character of the movement or to prepare the semi-proletariat organizationally against the reassertion

of the black bourgeoisie' (Moyo and Yeros 2005, 193 their emphasis). It could in fact be argued that the opposite is the case, and that the agrarian change strategy went *too far* within the state and was thereby captured by what Raftopoulos (2006, 216) labels as the state 'commandism' of ZANU-PF. Despite the significance they often give to movement autonomy, the arguments by Moyo and Yeros seem to be part of a more general state-centred theory of change, such that movement un-civility 'obtained radical land reform *through the state* and *against imperialism*' (Moyo and Yeros 2005, 179 their emphasis). It may be claimed that, unlike the other position in the debate that puts civil society on a pedestal, Moyo and Yeros are mesmerised by the state—which they prefer to label as a radicalised state and not as an authoritarian state—as a source for breaking with the civility of capital and for apparently post-imperialist transformation.

It is the politically progressive aspect of the land movement that is the most contentious argument made by Moyo and Yeros. They note that land redistribution over the past few years has undone racial property rights in rural areas and has redressed historical injustices by giving significant number of worker-peasants access to land. In so doing, it has undermined the racial manifestation of the class struggle in Zimbabwe thus laying the basis for the next—and presumably more class-based—phase of the NDR. Mandaza argues in a similar vein: on the one hand, the emergent African bourgeoisie is bound to benefit most from the land reform process, yet this will simultaneously open up the struggle 'tomorrow between the black bourgeoisie and the underclass of society' (*The Zimbabwe Mirror*, 14 July to 20 July 2002). This is largely a teleological depiction of Zimbabwean society and history, and part of a grand narrative of social change (not unlike the grand narrative of civil society-led democratic transition and consolidation propagated by the civil-nationalists).

What the critics of Moyo and Yeros roundly denounce is their underestimation (or underplaying) of state violence. Thus, Moyo (2001, 325–30) argues that the short-term pain of uncivil and violent practices during the occupations must be weighed against the longer-term benefits for democratisation in advancing the NDR. Mandaza likewise argues that it is a 'politically reactionary position ... to deny the principle of land redistribution simply because the methods being employed are said to be bad' (*The Zimbabwe Mirror*, 27 October to 2 November 2000). In other words, the Revolution is to be defended at all costs, particularly given the penetration of the enemy within, in the form of civil society. For Raftopoulos and Phimister (2004, 376), this implies a crude stage-ist notion of change in that 'democratic questions will be dealt with at a later stage, once the economic kingdom has been conquered' (see also Moore 2003).

Oddly enough, during the 1990s, Mandaza (1994) raised significant doubts about the Zimbabwean state as a candidate for social transformation. He argued then that 'the principle of the sole and authentic liberation movement [ZANU] provided the rationale, and indeed the licence, whereby the party in post-independence period can ride rough-shod—in the interests of the masses!—over the interests of the very people it purports to serve' (Mandaza 1994, 195). This state logic is perhaps consistent with the subduing of the land movement by the Zimbabwean state through the fast track land reform programme, and relates to the Radical society-centric critique of the state. Indeed, top-down agrarian restructuring has been a marked feature of the Zimbabwean landscape over the past 10 years, such that both urban civil society and the state (in their own particular ways) sought to undercut an autonomous land

movement. ‘Left-nationalists’ would claim (and quite rightly) that the Zimbabwean state is a critical site of struggle and tension which embodies both progressive and regressive moments (and not purely the latter as asserted by civic-nationalists), and that these contradictory moments became manifested in its fluctuating response to the land movement. In this sense, their position is consistent with the Radical state-centric view of transformation, although the land movement is said to fall outside the realm of the civil. Labelling the land movement as ‘uncivil’ is on the whole done to distinguish it from imperialist civil society, but this claim does speak to the understanding of civil society as rule-of-law based social space.

Conclusion

The two positions in the Zimbabwean debate both provide partial stories. In doing so, they simultaneously identify and emphasise specific opposing trajectories (or internally related contradictory moments) that mark tension-riddled Zimbabwean society. Sensitivity to these trajectories is necessary to start thinking about the prospects for progress (understood as a contradictory, open-ended and invariably unfinished process) in Zimbabwe. But the trajectories identified are ultimately subsumed under grand narratives that fall within a common statist framework and valorise state politics (as different sides of the same state-centric coin), by conceptually capturing the social struggles in Zimbabwe as centred on the state. This involves a narrative about defending civil liberties against an authoritarian state and advancing towards a liberal democratic state, or a narrative about using the commanding heights of the state to advance distorted processes of transformation. These were the stories that were constantly being told about Zimbabwe during the first decade of this century. The stories dovetail into the contestation over a specific state form (notably about regime change) but the state form itself is never queried. Deploying a Radical society-centred conception of transformation may lead to different stories that open up new vistas of understanding about what animated the urban civics and land occupations.

Underlying the debates about civil society, democratic change and agrarian transformation in Zimbabwe has been a deathly silence on whether civil society in fact exists in post-2000 Zimbabwe. It may be convincingly argued that traditionally, the notion of civil society is linked specifically and exclusively to liberal democratic capitalist societies and that societies marked by compulsive forms of rule (authoritarianism and traditionalism) are devoid of civil societies. Hence, colonial settler societies in Africa, in which chieftainships dominated agrarian spaces and colonised subjects in urban spaces were racially oppressed, were characterised only by ‘White’ civil society. Post-colonial Zimbabwe, where rural chiefdoms remain and repressive modes of state rule prevail throughout the country, may likewise be largely devoid of a rule-of-law civil society (despite the marked prevalence of NGOs). In this light, debates about the pros and cons of (an existing) civil society in contemporary Zimbabwe would be misplaced.

Notes

1. In a rare collaborative work (Moyo, Makumbe, and Raftopoulos 2000), Moyo (a radical nationalist) and Raftopoulos and Makumbe (civil nationalists) use civil society ‘loosely’

(2000, xii) as equivalent to NGOs, understood though as both intermediary donor-funded organisations and community-based organisations. The point is that this is an institutionally based definition of civil society.

2. Interestingly, prior to the 'wave' of democratisation throughout Africa during the 1990s, Shivji (1989) theorised about the NDR and human rights, and argued (unlike Moyo and Yeros) that the furtherance of the NDR necessitated a distinctive anti-authoritarian (and thus democratic) thrust that privileged the right of the popular classes to organise independent of the repressive nation-state. In this respect, Neocosmos (1993) repeatedly emphasises the critical link between 'democratisation from below' (1993, 8) and agrarian reform, and he argues that democratic struggles are 'the primary issue' (1993, 15) in ensuring progressive reform.

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